

An “Appropriated Unusual” Reflecting Team: Inviting Parents to Be on the Team

Ana Sofia Barbosa de Oliveira

In many contexts of contemporary life, to invite children into conversations in which they are radically consulted about their own lives is the exception to the rule.

—Michael White, 2000

ABOUT CHILD-FOCUSED PRACTICES

When working with children, one of the main differences between traditional family therapy practices and child-focused ones is the acceptance of the assumption that child problems are distracting from a major problem in couple's relation by the first one, and its rejection by the second (Burnham in Wilson, 1998). The idea that “the problem lies with the parents” (p. xvi) is no longer taken into account in child-focused therapeutic interventions. This is a revolutionary step, for it has important implications in terms of theoretical approaches, applied methods, and techniques (Burnham, 1992). Child-focused practices allow hearing the child's voice and his narrative. The therapist uses another language, which is play.

Ana Sofia Barbosa de Oliveira is a systemic therapy trainee in the Individual and Family Therapy Department, supervised by Professor Doctor Luis Miguel Neto, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Lisbon, Portugal (E-mail: anasofiaoliveira@clix.pt).

Journal of Family Psychotherapy, Vol. 14(2) 2003
<http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J085>
© 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
10.1300/J085v14n02_07

The major goal of child-focused practices and narrative therapy is finding exceptional situations that do not agree with the dominant narratives (usually problem saturated ones) and to co-create alternative narratives that are more positive and hopeful (White, 2000).

ABOUT REFLECTING TEAMS

Reflecting teams give an opportunity to change observing positions and to hear different voices (Andersen, 1990). This means that a reflecting team format can be useful in child-focused practice. It gives parents the opportunity to see the problematic issue through different eyes, which will allow them to establish a different relationship with their children. It also gives the child the opportunity to hear different voices, which can help to build new identities (White, 2000).

AN “APPROPRIATED UNUSUAL” REFLECTING TEAM

At first, this parental reflecting team format was just a “preoccupying question” (Wilson, 1998, p. 109) about parents’ feelings in a child-focused format. Having to consult a therapist who develops a strong bond to the child can threaten parents’ position. Parents could feel useless and unfit during a therapeutic intervention in which the child plays such a prominent role. Having this preoccupation in mind it is suggested to maintain child-focused practice as a framework and to invite parents to be on the reflecting team.

According to Wilson (1998), having the child as the focus of intervention is not equal to giving a subordinate position to parents. Parents still have a fundamental role and one of the therapist’s goals is to engage them in a collaborative work.

Within this parental reflecting team format it is possible to focus on the child and simultaneously, to give parents an important task in order to help their child. This format can enhance feelings of resourcefulness and usefulness to parents and it is an “appropriated unusual” (Andersen, 1990, p. 62) format because it is sufficiently different from what has been done to produce change by that family until that moment, but not too different to be understood and to produce that change.

INVITING PARENTS TO BE ON THE TEAM

During the initial period of therapy, the whole family is together in the therapy room. The main goal is to break the ice, introduce the thera-

pist, the team, and all members of the family, and to get to know each other apart from the problem (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997). It is also important to discuss the setting; the importance of using a team behind the mirror, of using a reflecting team format, of having the parents as members of the team, and of focusing on the child.

After this period, parents are invited to go to team's room where the reflecting team attitude is explained. Special importance is given to the fact that a different observer position implies different views. That is the main reason to be there. Also discussed is the importance of emphasizing positive aspects above all others.

As in the usual reflecting team format, there are changing positions between the team and the child-therapist system. Parents, as reflecting team members, are asked to underline some of the aspects that interested them the most during the session and to share their views along with the other members of the team.

WHY USE THIS REFLECTING TEAM FORMAT IN CHILD-FOCUSED PRACTICES?

In order to increase collaborative work with parents, emphasize their importance in therapy, distinguish their role from children's role, and avoid the devaluing feelings that otherwise could flourish, inviting the parents to be on the reflecting team seems to be an "appropriated unusual" (Andersen, 1990, p. 62) idea.

This format gives parents the opportunity to be in a different observer position apart from the observed system (therapist and child)—a meta position that could allow them to create alternative narratives to the blaming position and problem-saturated narratives (White, 2000). Inviting parents into reflection can also be an important step in addressing the child's expectations. From the child's point of view, hearing grown ups, parents included, giving him value can be important to restore his life in a more positive way and to restore his identity (White, 2000).

AND IF IT IS DIFFICULT TO DO . . .

For parents, being on the reflecting team can be too different from their usual way of looking into situations. To go beyond this, the team is heterogeneous. It has professional and experienced people who can be a model to the parents. The team can be of precious help in avoiding problem-saturated narratives.

For the child it could be frightening to stay with the therapist on her own. If this happens, it is always possible to use the reflecting team format inside the therapy room or to increase the reflecting team sharing.

FINAL WORDS

In western modern cultures, children are becoming more and more important. They are increasingly being heard and respected. It is accepted nowadays that childhood is an individualized developmental stage that has its specific characteristics. Children have their own interests, ways of thinking, resources. They are not conceptualised as little adults anymore (White, 2000). There is a children-focused culture. This means that child-focused practices are coherent with current ideas and values in western modern societies.

REFERENCES

- Andersen, T. (1990). The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues about the Dialogues. Borgmann, U.K.
- Burnham, J. (1992). Approach-Method-Technique: Making Distinctions, Creating Connections. *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation & Management*. 3, 3-26.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1997). Playful Approaches to Serious Problems. Norton, New York.
- White, M. (2000). Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews, Dulwich Centre Publications, Australia.
- Wilson, J. (1998). Child-Focused Practice: A Collaborative Systemic Approach. Karnac Books, London.

Copyright of Journal of Family Psychotherapy is the property of Haworth Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.